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SUBJECT: THAT WAS JUST A DREAM: HAINAN NOT LOSING ITS
RELIGION, DESPITE OFFICIAL CLAIMS

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[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. According to Hainan officials, only
80,000 Hainanese, or about 1% of Hainan's population,
practice an officially sanctioned religion. Of these,
40,000, or half, are Protestants. For Hainan's government,
the protection of religious freedom is important, but the
need to "coordinate" religion with socialist principles is
at least equally important. Meanwhile, first-hand
observations suggest that the real number of believers in
Hainan far surpasses 80,000. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) On March 25, Consulate and Embassy officers met in
Haikou with Yang Zhenxiong, chief of the religious affairs
section of the Hainan Department of Nationalities and
Religious Affairs (DNRA), as part of a visit designed to
glean insight into the state of religion in Hainan. Yang
was accompanied by an unidentified colleague from his
section. After the meeting we visited a "patriotic," i.e.,
officially authorized, Protestant church. We will report on
that visit via a separate telegram.

Officially, just 1% of the population practices religion

[1](#)3. (U) According to DNRA, all of China's officially
recognized religions are present in Hainan, with almost
80,000 believers, 132 registered religious venues, 35
religious groups (i.e., congregations) and 400 religious
professionals.

Officially, more Protestants than anything else

[1](#)4. (U) Hainan's largest official religion in terms of
followers is Christianity, i.e., Protestantism, with 40,000
faithful, or half of all officially sanctioned believers in
Hainan. The complete breakdown is:

- 40,000 Christians (Protestants)
- 20,000 Buddhists
- 10,000 Taoists
- 8,000 Muslims
- 1,000 Catholics

The New Socialist Religion?

[1](#)5. (U) According to the DNRA officials, Hainan's government

has always (i.e., since 1988, when Hainan was separated from Guangdong and established as a separate province) attached "great importance" to religious freedom. At the same time, it has strived to "coordinate" religious practices with socialist principles. Religion must "comply" with the society of the time, and the government "encourages" religious followers "to serve society."

¶6. (U) In addition to facilitating the recovery of some 290,000 square meters (about 88,415 square feet) of religious venues that were confiscated in the past, the Hainan government has also permitted the construction of new venues when these have become necessary. Meanwhile, the participation of religious followers in politics is encouraged. Presently, there are 32 religious followers either serving in Hainan's provincial legislature or holding leadership positions in Hainan's branch of the Communist Party. Hainan's government also deems it important to "nurture" religious followers, and to this end has sent 39 religious professional to training in universities and in specialized sessions.

Comment: An incomplete picture of faith in Hainan

¶7. (SBU) Our interlocutors were probably right when they claimed that only one out of every 100 Hainanese professed an officially sanctioned religion. Likewise, there is no reason to question the assertion that, of that 1%, more than half are Christians (including both Protestants and Catholics). However, the burning incense sticks and posters of the goddess of mercy Guanyin that are plentiful in Haikou suggest the real number of believers is much higher. In particular, the number of Buddhists must certainly be much higher than 20,000. Some of the uncounted believers

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probably make a conscious decision to practice their faith outside the official realm. Others probably just do not care enough.

¶8. (SBU) Moreover, the indigenous beliefs of ethnic groups such as the Li are not accounted for at all in the official numbers, even though, as Yang explained, the Li do "worship totems." So the islanders of Hainan are probably not the godless lot that official numbers could lead one to believe.

DONG